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National Guard plans rile Clearfield residents

Cirard neighbors fear peace of their woods threatened by training center

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Ken Hoffman broke ground five years ago for the vacation spot he'd always wanted, a cabin of hand-cut logs on four acres in the wooded hills and trout streams of northeastern Clearfield County.

Over the next 200 weekends, Hoffman and his wife drove west from their home in Marietta, Lancaster County, to their property in

Girard.

With help from relatives, they stripped bark from logs and erected a house with a porch from which to watch the sunsets and revel in the sounds of the forest.

The sparsely populated area, about 100 miles northeast of Pittsburgh and 15 miles from Clearfield, is a sportsmen's haven of lush woods and filled-in strip mines that make perfect courses for riding all-terrain vehicles. Hoff-

man's nearest neighbors live in a handful of houses down the road, and he likes that just fine.

"I've been coming up here since I was 16 years old for the same reason — the peace and quiet," said Hoffman, 47, who reads and installs meters for Pennsylvania Power and Light Inc.

"You can hunt and fish. You can be left alone when you want to be. I just fell in love with the place."

So Hoffman wasn't thrilled to

learn a few weeks ago that his rustic oasis of privacy has been targeted for invasion by the 17,000 soldiers of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard.

The National Guard has its eye on up to 8,000 acres in Girard for a training center to supplement its cramped main facility at Fort Indiantown Gap in Lebanon County. While other sites have been con-

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The duties of the Office of State Inspector General (OSIG) are to deter, detect, prevent, and eradicate fraud, waste, misconduct, and abuse in the operations of executive agencies. In 2004 an OSIG employee came forward. He investigated the Clearfield County tank range and those involved in fraudulent conduct. He believed the Pennsylvania National Guard attempt to steal the public land in Stony Creek Valley was triggered by exposing the Clearfield corruption.

It is not the intent of these uploads to disparage the women and men of the Pennsylvania National Guard who fulfilled their mission in two prolonged wars. The difficulty is with the conduct of the state agency known as the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA). From this land purchase in Clearfield County to an attempt to take the public land in Stony Creek Valley, the actions of this state agency have been suspect.

There is a difference between the bureaucrats in the state agency and the women and men who served their country. Those who want to Save Stony Creek Valley are not anti-military. If opposition to this land grab in Stony would jeopardize the security of this country, you would not be reading this. This is not about security, this is about opportunism.

National Guard makes town nervous

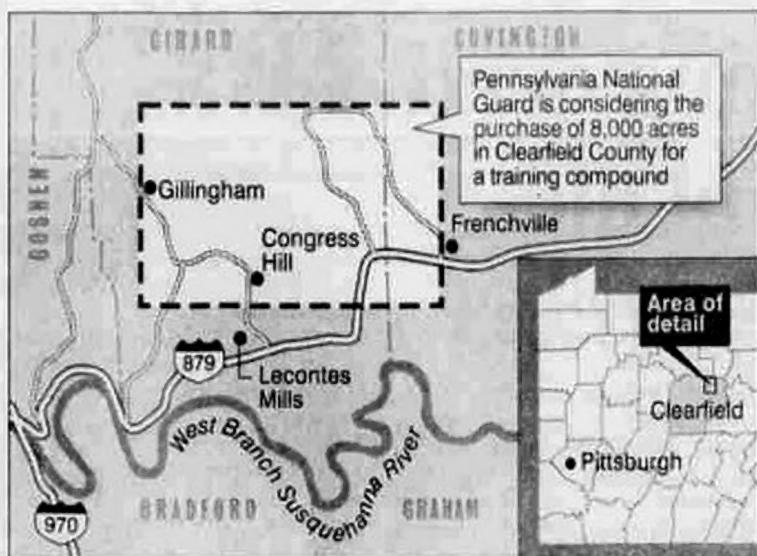
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sidered, state and National Guard officials said Girard was the front-runner.

If it can buy at least 5,000 adjacent acres of land in Girard, the Guard plans to erect a center where its members would train and practice maneuvers with tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and other armored vehicles that run on tracks, said Lt. Col. Chris T. Cleaver, a spokesman for the National Guard. No weapons would be fired during those maneuvers, Cleaver said.

The center would also include buildings to house and maintain vehicles and equipment as well as some type of housing for Guard members, Cleaver said.

The center is needed, Cleaver said, because the Guard doesn't have enough room on Indiantown Gap's 19,200 acres to accommodate different kinds of training exercises at the same time. It would also make it easier for Guard members who live in northern and Western



Diane Juravich/Post-Gazette

Pennsylvania to fulfill training requirements without frequent trips across the state to Indiantown Gap, he said.

The state's National Guard is the largest in the nation, and its mem-

bers have never been busier than in recent years due to military actions in Bosnia and Kosovo, Cleaver said. In addition, the Department of Defense, the FBI and other law-enforcement agencies train at Indiantown Gap, swelling the number of people who used it last year to 177,000.

That makes it difficult to schedule training sessions there, Cleaver said, especially when firearms or aerial bombing sessions make it impossible to use land around firing or bombing ranges for tank maneuvers.

But news of the training center and the tight-lipped way the National Guard has handled the project has alarmed Hoffman, who said he recently was told that the Guard was negotiating with a coal company to buy a former strip mine that abuts his property on Gillingham Road.

It also has confused and worried more than a few of the 630 residents of Girard who don't want their peaceful life disrupted.

Hoffman, who is circulating fliers and petitions aimed at blocking the center, said he and other residents were worried about the noise, increased traffic, lowered property values and wear and tear on roads that would accompany an influx of National Guard members nearly every weekend throughout the year and each week during the summer. Residents also are afraid they could be hurt or their homes damaged if weapons or artillery were fired.

Hoffman questioned how much

revenue the township would lose if the property were purchased by the state and declared to be tax-exempt. He said he was also worried that sportsmen who have been allowed to hunt, fish and ride all-terrain vehicles on much of the property in question would be barred if the Guard bought it.

Residents also are afraid of losing their properties if the state decides to seize it using eminent domain powers, said Lanie Davis, vice chairman of Girard's Board of Supervisors. In recent months, residents have come to township meetings and asked questions about the project, but supervisors have not had answers for them.

"People are confused and anxious," Davis said. "No one [from the National Guard] has come to us or filed anything with us. We really would like to have some idea of why they want to come here."

State and National Guard officials said they'd been mum about the plan because they hadn't reached agreements to buy several parcels of land they hope to combine into one tract. They are negotiating with several land owners, but said they'd tried to keep their intentions quiet because they don't want to drive land prices up.

Cleaver didn't know how the site was chosen or how much money would be needed to buy the land and build the center. But he said the Guard hoped to begin using the center in 2002. The state Legislature in 1997 allocated \$8 million for the project.

Cleaver said residents should welcome rather than fear the arrival of the Guard, which intends to improve the land it buys. He said the Guard would buy environmentally damaged land, then reclaim it to build the center.

The National Guard has the expertise to do that because it frequently works with the state Fish and Boat Commission and Departments of Environmental Protection and Conservation and Natural Resources to reclaim land ravaged by strip mining and streams tainted with acidic mine runoff, Cleaver said.

Much of the property the Guard is considering would fit that bill, Cleaver said, but he declined to identify specific tracts. Before the

training center could be built, the Guard would be required to study the center's impact on the environment and would have to address any problems it would cause.

Cleaver and Brad Swartz, a spokesman for the state Department of General Services, said the state did not plan to seize property from owners. The Department of General Services is handling the property negotiations.

"When you're looking at this much land, I'm sure people would have concerns about what we'll be doing," Cleaver said. "But a Mack truck is louder than an M-1 tank. We will make it a point to avoid where people live and to provide as much buffer as possible. Most people would never hear or see us."

Cleaver said sportsmen would be allowed to hunt on land owned by the Guard, saying that has been permitted at Indiantown Gap. Hunters, however, would be required to register with the Guard and to sign in and out when they're on the property.

The project would have a positive economic impact on a region where the economy has been dependent on the shrinking coal and timber industries, Cleaver said. He didn't know how many jobs would be spawned by the center, but he said local contractors and workers would be hired to build it and to fill jobs there when it is completed.

Also, Guard members who come to the center to train are likely to buy gas, food and other items at nearby businesses, Cleaver said.

Indiantown Gap, which is more than twice as large as the proposed Girard center, brings about \$50 million into its regional economy each year.

"We would do what we could to make people welcome us," he said.

"We will make it a point to avoid where people live and to provide as much buffer as possible. Most people would never hear or see us."

Lt. Col. Chris T. Cleaver, spokesman for the National Guard

But Hoffman said he and other Girard residents would remain worried until the National Guard puts its plans for the property on paper and presents them for the community to review.

Davis said some residents wanted assurances that the Guard won't occupy the property, then decide later to add training exercises in which weapons would be fired. Tom Weimann, 44, a gun shop owner from York who owns a hunting cabin on Gillingham Road, said he wanted to be sure the Guard would-

n't change its mind about condemning and seizing property.

Hoffman said he didn't want the center at all.

"It's what the government isn't telling me that's got me worried," said Hoffman, who plans to push the National Guard to hold a public hearing on the plan. "Not knowing what they're going to do brings about anxiety on everybody's part. I just wish property owners would think about the impact this could have on future generations before they sell."